



Safety Scene

Depression in the Workplace

by Molly E. Butz

Tips for spotting and dealing with depression in the workplace.

Although it's a topic that's often avoided in the workplace, depression affects nearly ten percent of the U.S. population age 18 and older every year. When left untreated, depression can touch any and all areas of a person's life, including their performance and safety at work. Decreased productivity, low morale, absenteeism and accidents are just a few of the ways depression can affect a person in the workplace.

The stigma attached to depressive illnesses oftentimes makes workers hesitant to track down the support they need and even less likely to broach the subject at work. However, with appropriate treatment, many people can realize relief from the symptoms of depression and consequently the symptoms' effects on daily tasks. Creating a workplace that proactively deals with depression can positively impact your employees and, you may discover, your bottom line.

What Is Depression?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), depression is "a serious medical illness" characterized by "feeling 'down' and 'low' and 'hopeless' for weeks at a time." And, although anyone can feel "sad" or "down" from time to time, depression is a much more serious and long-lasting concern.

Additionally, many things can contribute to depression. The National Mental Health Association (MNHA) suggests that depression can be caused by one or more of the following: biology, gender, medications, genetics, environment, difficult life events (e.g., divorce, financial problems or the death of a loved one).

Some people suffer from short-term or situational depression, which can be treated with counseling and/or medication for a limited period of time. Others, whose depression is genetic or biological, may need a long-term treatment plan.

In the Workplace

There are numerous symptoms associated with depression, from persistent feelings of sadness, anxiety and worthlessness to fatigue, difficulty concentrating and insomnia. At work, these symptoms can affect productivity, attitude and even increase the chances that an employee will be involved in an accident. Depression can also lead to absenteeism, lost workdays and increased health care claims. Read on for proactive strategies for dealing depression in the workplace.

Educate your employees about depression. Teaching your employees to recognize the signs and symptoms of depression can help them spot the illness in their co-workers and themselves. You can begin with a simple list of symptoms (download "Depression: Signs & Symptoms" from **SupportDocs** at www.sbcmag.info) and a toolbox talk. If you don't feel comfortable presenting the information yourself or are looking for something more in-depth, consider securing a handful of brochures from a local mental health professional and book an appointment for him/her to come and talk with your staff.

Provide a positive, healthy working environment. Small improvements can transform a work environment into a happy, healthy place. Think about adding live plants to common employee areas such as the cafeteria or locker room. Their color and

at a glance

- Symptoms of depression include persistent feelings of sadness, anxiety and worthlessness to fatigue, difficulty concentrating and insomnia.
- Depression can result in absenteeism, lost workdays or increased health care claims.
- Depression is a delicate but serious subject, and many people fear they will be judged for admitting their condition.

fresh oxygen will help stimulate the environment. And, speaking of the cafeteria, making healthy food choices available can help everyone feel better, so if you offer food in any capacity (even a vending machine) lock-in some nutritious options if possible.

Make mental health services readily available. Providing information about and access to good mental health services can be as simple as posting a list of providers in your lunch room. If you don't already, you may also want to consider offering an employee assistance program (EAP). EAPs often include voluntary mental health assessments, short-term counseling and referral services for employees looking for longer-term help.

Be supportive. If you are concerned that one or more of your employees is dealing with depression, approach it cautiously and focus on the business side of the situation. (Under no circumstances should you attempt to diagnose an employee or co-worker, leave that to a trained mental health professional.) The Society for Human Resource Management suggests that you start by saying something simple like: "I'm concerned that you've been late to work often and aren't meeting your performance objectives. I'd like to see you get back on track." This will open a line of communication without intruding on an employee's personal life.

Above all, remember that depression is a delicate (but serious) subject and although there is absolutely no reason to feel ashamed about having a depressive illness, many people fear they will be judged. Being gentle and sensitive are important, and confidentiality is key. Plus, healthy, happy employees means productive, safe employees, too! And you know what we have to say about that: Safety first! **SBC**

For information about Seasonal Affective Disorder, a specific type of depressive illness, go to **SupportDocs** at www.sbcmag.info.

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